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ABSTRACT

By tracing and connecting significant shifts in Baptist political and theological rhetoric to trends within the larger culture, this rhetorical transformation can be seen as establishing and maintaining these groups as significant forces in American culture. Before 1800, Baptists were against infant baptism, regarding baptism as a matter of individual choice. This privitized religion by emphasizing personal salvation, reflecting the individualism which was the foundation of their committment to church/state separation. During the Great Revival of the early 1800s, Baptist views shifted from "Calvinistic" limited atonement to salvation for the asking, while retaining a heavy emphasis on God's sovereignty in all matters. At this time their rhetoric also moved away from political subjects such as church/state separation toward spiritual matters (salvation, questions of religious practice). These shifts reflected the rise of democratic individualism in Post-Revolutionary America, and the decline of church influence over civic matters. From 1800 to World War I, pressure for social and religious orthodoxy increased, especially in the South. This orthodoxy, accompanied by a defensive attitude toward the North, was perpetuated by the agrarian society of the South and the homogeneity of population characteristic of the region. Today, however, because of radical cultural changes in the 1960s and 1970s, this orthodoxy is challenged, and Southern Baptists face a stuggle between moderates, who appear willing to adjust their theology to meet the demands of contemporary culture, and hard-line fundamentalists, who insist on strict adherence to doctrine developed in an earlier era. (MM)

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John Clark, Billy Graham and Baptist

Trends Toward Cultural Legitimacy

Jimmy Thomas Davis

If you had been standing on the shores of Boston Harbor on a Sunday morning in November of 1669 you might have caught a glimpse of a strange sight--A group of nicely dressed, well established working class citizens loading into a large row boat and launching into the chilly whitecaps of the bay. Given the harshness of the circumstances you might be surprised to learn that these early Bostonians were on their way to church. Their trek to Noddles Island to attend services led by Thomas Goold and William Turner would be repeated regularly for the next five years. Goold and Turner, Baptists living in semi-banishment, in addition to revealing substantial personal strength, provide a potent example of the adaptability of religious practice to the demands of the host culture.

Like the other panelists I believe I can demonstrate how the transformation of the rhetoric of religious groups establishes or maintains those groups as significant forces in their culture. I plan to illuminate this proposition by tracing significant shifts in Baptist political and theological rhetoric and connecting those shifts to trends within the larger culture. Approaching the subject both chronologically and topically, we will examine significant issues among Baptists during three time periods: pre-1800, 1800-World War I, and World War I to the present.

We begin, then, with Baptist rhetoric regarding infant baptism and church/state separation prior to 1800. One of the imperatives early Baptists derived from their study of Scripture emphasized the need for the believer's baptism by immersion, hence the name "Baptist." The first Baptist groups which can be clearly distinguished from their Puritan and congregational forebearers, appeared in 1608. At that time John Smyth, and Englishman and a "Scholler of no small reading, and well seene and experienced in arts" (Hall, 108), led a group of Separatists to Holland to escape persecution inflicted upon them by James I. While in Holland, Smyth and his congregation evolved from Separatists to Baptists by rejecting infant Baptism in favor of "believer's" Baptism. As Smyth explained, "baptism in Popery is false baptisme, and so in the Lords account no better than Pagan washing, being administered upon infants a subject that God never appointed to baptisme:..." (Smyth, 50). Believer's baptism could be performed only on those who "hear, believe, and with penitent heart receive the doctrines of the Holy Gospel. For such hath the Lord Jesus commanded to be baptized and no[t] unspeaking

children ("Short Confession"). At first Baptist congregations used a variety of baptism techniques, including sprinkling and pouring, but, after further study of the Bible, they settled on immersion as the appropriate method ("The Confession of Faith," 1644).

Plunging or dipping the entire body served to distinguish Baptists for the general population since the rite had to be conducted in full public view in a stream or lake. The practice also proved quite scandalous since the earliest baptisms were usually conducted in the nude, resulting in loss of modesty, and sometimes in the winter, resulting in loss of life to participants (see Davies, 505-507). Early Baptists often paid the price in persecution for their seemingly aberrant behavior, but eventually reformed their methods in favor of common civility (see "London Confession," 1644).

The significance of the immersion issue is difficult to overstate, not because of the direct changes it caused in religious practice, but because of the social and religious structure it implied. This becomes clearer when viewed in light of the Baptist experience with Puritanism in North America. The Puritans, themselves religious dissenters, held that the children of church members qualified as "saints" by virtue of their parents' beliefs. This "covenant" theology sought to assure the continuity and stability of the church in the same way that the rite of circumcision maintained the Jewish Church (see Gaustad, 103). Such a theology resulted in the hereditary sainthood and social aristocracy characteristic of early New England.

The Baptist stand against pedobaptism (infant baptism) not only ignored the possibility of a hereditary covenant between God and the Puritans, it also denied the validity of territorial parishes, tax-supported meetinghouses and clergy, and the ecclesiastical law foundational to New England life (McLaughlin, 131). The Baptist challenge to this system highlighted "the breakdown of the corporate Christian state and the substitution for it of a state of free individuals relying upon their own judgment to create the city of God upon the American hill (Gaustad, 104).

Emphasis on individual choice regarding baptism set Baptists apart as subjects of ridicule early on. However, Baptists, in concert with other groups, privitized religion by emphasizing personal salvation and spiritual purity at the congregational level (Boles in Wilson, 27). This individualistic spirit, born in Separatism and nurtured in persecution, implies another significant distinguishing feature of Baptists: church/state separation.

The origins of Baptist commitment to separation of church and state lie in the persecution which occurred between 1630 and 1700. Religious upheaval in Europe, and Great Britain, in particular caused discontent that spilled over in considerable measure into North America. Notably, in New England, the Puritans, under

pressure from Charles I and Archbishop Laud, formed the Massachusetts Bay Company and moved over 1000 people to the American frontier in 1630. Others who established colonies for religious reasons included Lord Baltimore and the English Catholics in Maryland, William Penn and the Quakers in Pennsylvania and Roger Williams and the Baptists in Rhode Island.

The freedom to practice nonsanctioned religion varied widely among the colonies. The first Baptists in the colonies appeared in New England and suffered harassment, imprisonment, and banishment at the hands of Puritan magistrates (see Clark in Gaustad). A similar fate awaited Baptists in Virginia and the Southern colonies except that the punishment was executed by Anglicans rather than by Puritans (see Sweet). The middle colonies, New York, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania, allowed considerably more latitude in religious expression. Accordingly, Baptists were found in greater abundance in these areas (see Gardner).

Under the pressure of persecution, especially in Great Britain, New England, and the South, Baptists elaborated on their early doctrine requiring separation of the affairs of church and state. As Richard Overton, a member of the Thomas Helwys led English Baptist congregation, explained in 1614, "... the limits of Magistracy extend no further th[a]n humanity, or humane subsistence, not to spirituality, or spirituall being; and no further, th[a]n its owne nature extends, no further may its compulsive powere be stretched" (Brackney).

Such a sentiment echoed in New England thirty years later when John Clark, a transplanted English Baptist upbraided the Magistrates of Massachusetts for the arrest and conviction of himself and two other Baptists. Clark characterized the New England establishment as "false and evil, and not the order of the Gospel of Christ ..." (Gaustad, 11). Because they maintained power by using "carnal weapons," (Gaustad, 11), the magistrates, according to Clark, forfeited all claim to legitimate authority.

Later in New England Issac Backus proclaimed the Baptist ideal of church/state separation when he said,

> We view it to be our incumbent duty to render unto Caesar the things that are his but also that it is as much importance not to render to him anything that belongs only to God, who is to be obeyed rather than any man. [I]t is evident that this prerogative has been, and still is encroached upon in our land (Backus, 317).

Thus, in Colonial America, Baptists related to their host culture by co-sponsoring radical cultural change regarding individual freedom. In large measure the Baptist response to cultural pressure during this period maintained its radical nature because to do otherwise meant their elimination as an identifiable religious group. In early America Baptists found themselves threatened with extinction by a hostile culture. They fought back by insisting on individualism and freedom in religious affairs--two positions consistent with

the rising democratic-mindedness of Eighteenth Century America. In the years following the American Revolution Jeffersonian ideas concerning individual rights captured the minds and hearts of the new nation and Baptists were in an excellent position to capitalize on it.

The Great Revival, which erupted in Kentucky in 1799 and 1800 and engulfed most of the South, unified Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians under the banner of individual salvation. In spite of their technical theological differences each of these groups waded into the work of the revival and turned the tide of despair which threatened to drown religious sentiment in the 1790s.

However, the details of Baptist views on salvation underwent significant development during this period including a shift from "Calvinistic" limited atonement to salvation for the asking (see Barker, 94-103). Understanding this shift in theology requires a look at the second quarter of the Seventeenth Century.

At that time England experienced a dramatic rise in the number of Baptists and two distinct factions emerged among them. The earliest group, the General Baptists, followed John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in their embrace of the notion of atonement's "general" availability to mankind. However, under repression from the Crown and suffering from internal dissent, General Baptist congregations gradually dried up until they were consumed wholly, or in part, by other groups (Whitley, 252).

The Particular Baptists, a group which did not develop until the 1630s were much more Calvinistic than their General brethren and viewed atonement as something available only to the "elect" of God. The first Particular Baptists appeared as an outgrowth of Separatism and suffered the wrath of Charles I and Archbishop Laud, as did other dissenters. This persecution, rather than eliminating dissent, hardened it, resulting in civil war which "swept away both the king and the bishops, and paved the way for the common man to declare his mind on religious issues" (Underwood, 62). Toleration, the guiding principle of the Puritan Revolution, provided a chaotic religious scene in which Baptists flourished. By the time Charles II was invited to the throne in 1660, English Baptist congregations had grown from their 1644 level of 57 to 297 (Jordan, Vol. IV, 457). By way of comparison , Davies has pointed out that "the Particular Baptists had an honorable impact in England and the New World across the Atlantic while the General Baptists eventually withered away" (507). Thus, most Baptist emigres to the colonies of North America were Particular Baptists who held to the limited atonement of traditional Calvinism and became known as Regular Baptists. Colonial temperament, however, proved similar to that in the old country and another group of Baptists soon developed. This later group, the Separate Baptists, grew from the "experimental" religion of the Great Awakening. In particular, Issac Backus, who had experienced the dramatic personal conversion proclaimed by Whitefield and other revivalists, broke

with the Congregational Church, eventually embracing Baptist views and forming the first Separate Baptist Church. Between 1756 and 1776 over 70 Separate Baptist churches sprouted in New England.

Variant views over the nature of salvation kept Separate and Regular Baptists apart until near the end of the Eighteenth Century, the eve of the Second Great Awakening. The union of these two groups under the banner of revivalism marked a major shift in Baptist theology. This shift stands out dramatically in the contrasting views of two prominent Baptist preachers. First, Issac Backus, citing Matthew 20:15 and 16, wrote in 1789 that

> ... many are called but few chosen ... This is the true idea of election which men have an amazing quarrel against. For it depends entirely upon the will of God whether he will save any of us or not .... and when we come to die he may choose whether he will hear our cries for mercy or not (Backus, 469).

Backus and the advocates of particular election complained that the proponents of general election "perverted" the "sacred custom" (295) and, "just like the old serpent ... with malicious reflections upon God's government ... drew [man] into rebellion against God's revealed will" (294).

Backus' negative assessment of free grace had all but disappeared from Baptist theology by the mid-Nineteenth Century when an Alabama pastor wrote,

> The doctrines of the gospel which are chiefly involved in the conversion of sinful men are few and simple...and perfectly in the power of any individual under the influence of the spirit of promise. There is no hidden mystery in the grand doctrines of faith and repentance...(Crane, 1).

In order to appreciate the shift in the traditional (Calvinistic) Baptist atonement theology exemplified by these two preachers, the doctrine of limited atonement must be examined. This doctrine specifies that "man is a free agent but he cannot originate the love of God in his heart. His will is free in the sense that it is not controlled by any force outside of himself. As the bird with a broken wing is 'free' to fly but not able, so the natural man is free to come to God but not able" (Boettner, 62). From the earliest days of the English Particular Baptists to the Colonial Great Awakening in the mid-Eighteenth Century, most Baptists clung desperately to all the major Calvinistic doctrines in the face of both General Baptist Armenianism and State Church repression.

Colonial Baptist modifications to Calvinist atonement theology were part of an adjustment process which included Puritans, Presbyterians, and Dutch Reformed churches. The adjustment of Baptist Calvinistic theology

from particular atonement to general atonement may be seen first in the birth of Separate Baptists during the Great Awakening of the mid-Eighteenth Century, but waited for completion until the Second Great Awakening. Both the First and Second Awakenings occurred in the context of substantial religious decy. In spite of the dramatic impact of religion during the early years of colonial history, relatively few frontier dwellers were church members. Lack of interest in religious institutions captured the attention of religious leaders of the day who lamented "that the life of Religion is panting and gasping among us" (Willard).

Baptist relations with their host culture during the early years of the Republic contrasted dramatically with their Colonial situation. After the revolution Baptists were free to conduct their affairs as they saw fit and received increasing cultural acceptance. Their difficulty lay in the general irreligiousness of the times. The new enemy of popular religion was not state authority, but social apathy. The secret weapon against this insidious enemy was revival.

Revival in America, though it grew from the efforts of a variety of individuals and denominations, "proceeded from a situation that was universal throughout the colonies and arose from the necessity of finding a new method of bringing religion to the great masses of the religiously indifferent" (Sweet, Colonial, 282). Baptists found themselves in a unique position during both revival movements. Their beliefs regarding the independence of individual faith and practice from the moorings of religious institutions allowed them to ride the crest of the revivalistic wave which swept over the nation. Between 1740 and 1770, during the First Awakening, the number of Baptist churches in the colonies jumped 75 percent, from 60 congregations to 254 (Gardner, 21). By 1790 that number swelled to 978 with the vigorous growth sparked by frontier revivals still fifteen years away (Gardner, 21).

Revivalistic methods, however, required changes in Baptist theology regarding atonement. In the face of revivalism, grace could not be viewed as irresistable and salvation could not depend solely on God's choices and actions. Baptists, along with other Calvinists, found themselves in a doctrinal quandry which required either repudiation of Calvinism's irresistable grace or abandonment of the revivalistc bandwagon (Berk, 60). Resolution of this dilemma came in the evangelical Calvinism of preachers like Jonathon Edwards and Joseph Bellamy, and later James McGready and Barton Stone, who relied on "means of grace," such as fervent exhortation, to break down sinners' resistance to God's call (see Berk). This approach allowed for a theological middle ground where grace, though resistable, flowed from the headwaters of God's mercy.

Though the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries saw a shift in Baptist theology toward Arminianism's general atonement, Calvinism remained strong in Baptist ranks. In fact, Calvinism became more entrenched in

the Baptist mind since the problems of predestination and the ambiguity of limited atonement were eliminated. The blend of Calvinism and Arminianism adopted by Baptists retained heavy emphasis on the sovereignty of God in all matters, including salvation, as well as the moral guilt and depravity of man. The foundations laid for the belief system in the Great Awakening found dramatic extension in the Second Great Awakening in which Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians spearheaded the drive toward massive revival.

Concurrent with the shift in Baptist theology was a shift in emphasis in their rhetoric away from political subjects such as church/state separation toward spiritual matters such as salvation and questions of religious practice (i.e. footwashing, missions, etc.). This shift has two bases. First, with the Eighteenth Century decline of church influence over civil matters, Baptists escaped the smothering blanket of persecution under which they had labored for their first 150 years. Consequently, the need for radical projection of the gospel of church/state separation eased considerably.

Second, the rise of democratic individualism in the Post-Revolutionary period legitimated earlier Baptist emphasis upon personal freedom of choice in religious matters. In short, the founding of the American Republic shifted general public sentiment into a posture generally compatible with traditional Baptist principles.

The impact of these changes in the public mind and in Baptist theology is nowhere more apparent than in the South where pressure for social and religious orthodoxy increased steadily for over 100 years after the Second Great Awakening. The southern culture provided a favorable climate for the germination and flowering of America's largest non-Catholic denomination; the Southern Baptist Convention. Consequently, the remainder of this paper will focus on the relationship between Baptists and southern culture.

While the content of the Baptist version of the old-time religion underwent minor changes between the Second Great Awakening and World War II, most of these were in the direction of heightened commitment to orthodoxy. In order to appreciate the entrenchment of doctrine which occurred during this period we must move beyond beliefs peculiar to Baptists in the region into an examination of the "mind" of the South. Such an understanding will clarify, to some degree, the complex interaction between Southern Baptists and their host society.

John Boles has argued convincingly for the existence of a single "mind" among Southerners in regard to religion. He explains that,

> In the South the revolutionary heritage of dissent, the widely scattered pattern of settlement, [and] the central issue of revivalisic preaching, all combined to maintain the southern mind

> within a narrowly individual, pietistic, inward mold. But the essential unity of a conversion-centered theology so shaped the course of religious development in the South that the popular denominations can be viewed as one large synthesis of evangelical pietism. This basic unity of southern religion--practical, provincial, and individualistic--makes it possible for one to discuss the religious mind of the Old South (129).

The period following the Second Great Awakening witnessed not only an increase of religiousness in the South, but also an ever-growing sense of defensiveness within the region. The three decades after the Second Awakening saw a "gradual tightening of orthodoxy" (Boles, 189), partly as a bulwark against attacks on slavery and partly to protect against disruptive ideas from the North and Europe. Creation of a string of denominationally sponsored colleges during this period bears witness to Southern defensiveness (Tewkesbury). As Boles explains, the "awakening at the turn of the century helped set into motion the diverse forces that, by the decade of the 1830's, created an orthodox South, a South resistant to change and criticism in every form" (183). Even such notable Southerners as Thomas Jefferson, alarmed at Northern "anti-Missourianism," encouraged Southern families to keep their college-bound children in Southern schools (Current, 26).

The orthodoxy of revivalism complemented this social orthodoxy. Such a religion resisted change and fought more vigorously for adherence to the religion of tradition, both spiritual and social. Dieistic skepticism and irreligiousness withered under the heat of revivalism and its institutionalized denominational forms. By 1830 the "religiously solid South ... was on its unerring course toward realization before the dawn of the twentieth century" (Hill, 66).

The Civil War and Reconstruction only heightened Southern recalcitrance. Scalawags and carpetbaggers, in spite of their relatively infrequent appearance, hardened Southern resolve to maintain the status quo. As Hodding Carter II explained in his 1950 consideration of the Southern Legacy,

> The South ... stubbornly overlook[ed] the hundreds of devoted Northern men and women who came South after the Civil War to do their honest best for both races, to establish and teach in public and private schools for the freed Negro, to enter into legitimate business, to heal and preach, and to seek sincerely the political resurrection of the South. But their shadows and their memories were obscured and their numbers durfed by the circling buzzards who swooped down upon the prostrate body, by the cotton thieves and political plunderers, the tax ghouls and berserk conminglers, exploiting not only the prostrate Confederacy but the bewildered Negro (126).

"Reconstruction Without Regeneration," the second chapter of Richard Current's 1983 book, aptly describes Southern reaction to Northern sponsored Reconstruction. Unionist intentions to re-make the South in the

Northern image met increasing resistance from Southerners in the years following the Civil War. In a letter to Thaddeus Stevens, South Carolinian J.D. Hopkins railed against Reconstruction and hoped for an end to "this awful Yankee despotical sway and rule. O how we, the South, long for this relief from misrule, military oppression, anarchy and destruction" (from Current, 79). The Southerners of the New South of the late Nineteenth Century resisted Northern influence with vigor resembling their ante-bellum kinsmen. This defensive attitude, with its roots in the Civil War and Reconstruction, was perpetuated by two additional factors, the agrarian society and homogeneity of population characteristic of the region.

As an inevitable outcome of their rigid defensive posture, religious Southerners came to consider matters of faith and practice settled. Religion was not a matter for discussion. Rather, religion became a matter of profession, "and after one had professed, he or she became a member of a religious brotherhood, but this did not obligate him or her to examine the foundations of belief or assail the professions of others" (Weaver, 238). Religion in the Southern mind became a set of immutable and unchanging propositions. Orthodoxy required conformity to beliefs and practices viewed as consistent with historical Christianity.

Baptists in the South, then, faced the social upheaval of the Twentieth Century with more than a little apprehensiveness, and even some antagonism. After the Civil War the South settled into an economy based on poverty. In order to maintain tradition, or perhaps because they knew no better, Southern farmers continued to raise labor-intensive and land-consuming cotton in larger and laarger portions. In 1900 30% of the nine and one half million acres of Southern cropland were dedicated to cotton production. By 1930 cotton required over 36% of the cropland to produce a record 1.1 million bales. During the same thirty year period the average size of Southern farms slipped from nearly 100 acres to 70 acres (Census). Because so many small farmers succeeded in squeezing record cotton yields from the exhausted soil, prices of their products plummeted, heightening the depression in the South. During that time the trickle of Southerners from farm to city, which began just before the turn of the century, swelled into a torrent. Between 1890 and 1930 the farm population in the South fell 17%, from 87% to 70%. The thirty years that followed saw a 28% drop in the farm population, from 70% to 42% of the total, with the largest drop, 10.9%, coming in the 1950s (Census).

During this period of upheaval Baptists in the South made their most dramatic gains. By preaching an orthodox, stable theology in dramatically changing times, Southern Baptists grew into the monolithic 14 million member organization of today. Between 1890 and 1960 the Southern Baptist Convention grew 178% to over 9 million members, running well ahead of the 85% population growth in the region (Census).

Undoubtedly the most popular Southern Baptist preacher, Billy Graham's early sermons provide a clear view of Baptist accomodation to cultural change. In a 1949 revival in Los Angeles Graham declared, "I am...convinced that the only hope of preserving our way of life, the only hope of preserving our present culture, is an old-fashioned, heaven-sent revival" (McLoughlin, 1960, p. 50). Under the influence of such preaching the number of Southern Baptists grew 46 percent faster than the population of the region between 1930 and 1960. This growth slowed dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s staying only 4% ahead of population growth (Census).

The jury is still out regarding the precise cause of this decline in the Southern Baptist growth rate but it seems to be clearly related to the radical cultural changes wrought in the region in the 1960s and 1970s. The Southern Baptist Convention currently faces a crisis equal to that faced by Baptists at any time in their history. The present struggle pits moderates, who seem willing to adjust their theology to meet the demands of contemporary culture, against hard-line fundamentalists, who insist on strict adherence to doctrine developed in an earlier era. The question which remains is whether today's of Baptists will try to keep up with the times theologically or will maintain a belief structure rooted in revivalism and southern homogeneity in spite of the demise of each.

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